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Area legislators discuss budget woes, pledge to fight for constituents' values

BY ANDREW CANULETTE ACANULETTE@STTAMMANYFARMER.NET JUN 7, 2018 - 5:13 PM



State Sen. Sharon Hewitt

Photo by Andrew Canulette

Andrew Canulette

Local members of the state legislature spoke Thursday to a packed house gathered at Tchefuncta Country Club for what was supposed to be a legislative “wrap-up luncheon” staged by the West St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce.

But with the budget for Fiscal Year 2018-19 yet to be approved, the luncheon was more of a chance for six area legislators, all Republicans, to offer their ideas on compromises and to throw a few darts at Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards. But the overriding message was to pledge to constituents that they’d do what they could to get a budget hammered out before July 1.

Story Continued Below

The state faces a reported \$650 million shortfall if \$1 billion in temporary taxes are allowed to expire on June 30, so there was gravity in legislators’ words on Thursday.

“What I’ve heard consistently for the past 48 hours since I’ve been home is ‘Why can’t you guys just fix the problem?’” said District 1 state Sen. Sharon Hewitt, Slidell. “The short answer is there are too many people riding in the wagon and not enough people pulling the wagon. We have a governor who is great at creating a short-term crisis ... but he’s not really offering any solutions other than raising your taxes.

“We’ve heard from the governor that we’re kicking grandma to the curb at the nursing homes and closing hospitals and closing universities,” Hewitt said. “A few years ago, we even heard we would eliminate LSU football. Those things aren’t going to happen.”

She laid the problems at the feet of the governor’s office.

“Two years ago, we all promised to do fiscal reform for the state of Louisiana,” she added, “and all we’ve really seen from the governor’s office are broken promises.”

That was a sentiment shared by the five other legislators who attended the luncheon: District 11 Sen. Jack Donahue, Mandeville; District 12 Sen. Beth Mizell, Bogalusa; District 74 Rep. Scott Simon, Abita Springs; District 77 Rep. Mark Wright, Covington; and District 89 Rep. Reid Falconer, Madisonville.

Hewitt said Edwards is asking for nearly \$1 billion more in budgetary spending than previous Gov. Bobby Jindal had in his last budget. That’s too big a jump, and any cuts are coming from the wrong areas, legislators said on Thursday.

"We have to find some sort of compromise with this governor," Donahue said. "I don't think we can give him everything he's asking for. I think the statistics show he wants (an extra) \$650 (million in expenditures). I think the state should be able to cut about \$150 million of that. Some say we can get it to \$450 (million.)"

Donahue said he's fought for 11 years in Baton Rouge to introduce legislation to make government operate more efficiently. He said it's been a nearly impossible battle.

"It's very frustrating to me that we keep dropping the ball," he said.

Wright is new to the Legislature, having been elected to the District 77 seat late last year. He said he's seen "three camps" in Baton Rouge, with three very different views on how government should operate.

"You have some who say 'I don't want to raise taxes anymore,'" Wright said. "There's another camp that says 'I don't want to do this. I don't want to give you more revenue. I'll compromise and give you some, but I need you to cut a little bit.' Then there's a portion of (legislators) who want it all.

"My position from the start, and I've expressed it to the governor, his chief of staff and to our party, is that essentially, we said a couple years ago we were going to fix this problem. And we haven't. At some point, we have to stop the temporary (tax) steps."

Falconer said the fact that discussion like that is taking place is proof that the Legislature is independent of gubernatorial control.

"Democracy is designed to be a rough and tumble process," he said. "We have people from completely disparate points of view coming together at the Legislature ... trying to achieve a majority.

"I think what we're seeing, the frustration of the people, is that state government is evolving. ... I'm very proud of the job that's being done given the incredibly contentious environment that we work under."

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